The Bookshelf

Part II: Book Reviews

China: Alive in the Bitter Sea
Fox Butterfield
New York: Times Books, 1982, 457 pp., $19.95.

During the past decade, when it again became possible for Americans to visit China after more than twenty years of estrangement, there were frequent reports of a "new" China, espousing egalitarian ideals, "self-reliance," and overcoming traditional problems. Compared with the "old" China, there was reason enough to be impressed with China's progress since 1949. It was also true that these firsthand accounts were limited in many ways: by the relatively few journalists, scholars, and other visitors able to obtain access; by the relatively short duration of their stays; by what it was possible for them to observe; and by the relatively closed conditions that prevailed in China during and after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), up to "normalization" of relations with the United States on January 1, 1979. Within a few months, the first resident American reporters had arrived in Beijing, Fox Butterfield among them. His stay coincided with a period of "liberalization" in Chinese life and in Chinese contacts with foreigners that even now appears to be drawing tighter again. At the beginning of another decade, Butterfield offers still another picture of Chinese life as he experienced it during the years 1979-81.

What is *this* "new" China of the 1980s: Where rooms in The Great Hall of the People can be rented—for dancing? Where young Chinese no longer wave "little red books" of Mao's thought (indeed, where these books are now hardly to be found) but whose reading includes movie and fashion magazines? Where the proletarian dream now includes television sets, tape recorders, and refrigerators? Where, as in centuries past, officials with status exercise influence and privilege for themselves and their families?

Fox Butterfield, the *New York Times'* first resident reporter in China since

1949, provides answers in *China: Alive in the Bitter Sea* that are part history, part insight, part revelation, and part gossip—all of them personalized and based largely on what he observed and heard from Chinese friends and acquaintances during almost two years in Beijing.

This isn't what the average tourist or visitor sees and hears in China and the result at times is provocative, even titillating. It can also be a problem. Butterfield must rely heavily on those Chinese who seek him out, whatever their reasons, and on others he happens to meet. Anyone who has tried to report from China must react to this book with a certain ambivalence: with an understanding of the obstacles to getting any story at all while unable to confront accountable officials for their side of the story; with respect for what was ferreted out about some aspects of Chinese life; but with frustration, even impatience, over the narrow range of sources. The American reporter operates in relative isolation in China, even in Beijing where most of his time is spent because of the restrictions on travel. Inevitably, the information-gathering process in China raises questions of typicality and balance.

As in other societies, there are many realities in China. As in every society, America included, there is a dark side to Chinese life. Butterfield has shed light on it. He has also dwelled on it. From both city and countryside come stories of materialism; corruption; injustice; sexual repression; and discrimination based on sex, class, and family background. These stories stand in sharp contrast to the once-familiar egalitarian images and tales of self-reliance.

The shifts and turns of Chinese politics have taken their toll, no doubt. This book helps us to better understand the dimensions and possible consequences of the Cultural Revolution not just in terms of China's goals of modernization but in human terms, and the implications not just for understanding China's recent history but for its future. To the extent that China's youth (sixty-five percent of the population is under 35 years-old) suffer the disillusionment and cynicism reflected in Butterfield's account, the shape of that future must be an open question.

Intentionally or not, this book is also about the trials and limitations of being an American reporter in China. It is a frustrating and confusing encounter, a struggle for glimpses of what may or may not be typically true about a society that has always held foreigners at arm's length if not at bay. China is not unique in wanting to show its best side, or in its sensitivity about what is unattractive. The reporter's problem in China, as elsewhere, is access to all sides of a story—a balanced approach that in China is often impossible even for the most resourceful and relentless journalist.

"non striving" rather than as the more common "non action," Bush clearly sees Taoism as a somewhat activist philosophy—one that advocates a path to proper belief and behavior that differs from that of Confucianism, but is not without its own approach.

From philosophical Taoism, Bush then shifts to popular Taoism (associated primarily with village life) with its emphasis on practices to foster longevity and its development of a pantheon, religious texts, professionals, and rituals, including the community festivals still celebrated on Taiwan.

For his discussion of Buddhism, Bush dwells on the history of Buddhism in China and the initial hostility that marked its reception. He stresses that this foreign religion, with postulates directly contradictory to much of the ancient tradition, was gradually assimilated as duty to the ancestors became a rallying point for accepting its afterlife, deities, and good deeds. After touching on two Buddhist schools of limited impact and two universalist schools important for their contribution to doctrine, he stresses the two schools that have had the most popular appeal throughout history and into the present day: the Chan (Ch'an) school of meditation and the Pure Land school of universalist salvation. Through this last school, Bush highlights Buddhism's emphasis on compassion as exemplified by the popular bodhisattva, Guanyin (Kuan-yin), and the stress on doing merciful deeds for all living things, especially those in need.

Bush correctly views what he calls "popular folk religion" as the ultimate synthesis of the four main currents described above. But, as he points out, folk religion has been popular because it represents more than an amalgam; it also has responded to people's immediate needs by including local hero and nature cults, like those of Guanyu (Kuan Yu) and Matsu. After a discussion of local temples and deities, he tackles religious worship in the temple, home, and street—at one point following an imaginary Mrs. Wang on her trip to a local temple. Last, he includes a series of maxims, instructing the reader to judge which tradition they represent.

The last chapter is entitled "The Stream Flows On." Here, Bush brings us up to date on other religious traditions that have always remained foreign in Chinese life and were never so totally assimilated as Buddhism was, namely Islam and Christianity. Then he looks at Chinese religious life today—the popular religious tradition outside the P. R. C. (in overseas Chinese communities), thriving despite its abandonment by westernized intellectuals around the turn of the century; and, on the last three pages, he attempts to interpret what has happened to religious life inside the People's Republic of China. Here the book falters as Bush looks for traces of religious activity and then faintheartedly tries to equate Maoism with popular hero worship. This view is at best out of date; and given the changes in the P. R. C. since the book's publication in 1977, without a doubt he would have written a different three pages today.* The book concludes with a glossary and suggested bibliography of works that are inexpensive and easily available in paperback editions.

Because of the extensiveness of Bush's purview and the clarity of his prose, this handbook deserves to have wide usage in classrooms and among those looking for a general introduction to Chinese culture and religion. In such a short work, of course, there will always be omissions and oversimplifications. Fortunately, in this case, they can be remedied by referring to other specialized texts: for a discussion of the important theories of *yinyang* (*yin-yang*) and the Five Elements—also part of the ancient tradition—see Fung Yulan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 129-42; for a discussion of Legalism as an important counterweight to Confucianism, see de Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, pp. 122-44; for an examination of Mencius' notion of the right of the people to rebel, see de Bary, pp. 95-7; for one of the most complete explications of Taoism that attempts to link philosophical and religious Taoism, see the Encyclopedia Britannica section on Taoism; for a discussion of the very important challenges to the state by heterodox religious sects and the general religious rhetoric of rebellions and revolts, see C. K. Yang's *Religion in Chinese Society*, pp. 218-43 and for the constant attempts by the state to regularize or repress popular religions see his pp. 180-217; finally, for a sense of the festival year, see Laurence Thompson, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction*, pp. 108-13 or Wolfram Eberhard's *Chinese Festivals*. Some readers may also be bothered by the book's occasional use of colloquial language, its occasional meanderings that cry out for chapter sub-headings, its weak chapter endings, and its lack of an index.

These weaknesses aside, the book is ideal for the classroom. Argus Communications clearly has teachers in mind; they have included a set of questions, including page references, that are general and could be of value to the teacher or discussion leader using this book. All in all, the book stands as an important corrective to other materials currently available. It correctly traces the source to ancient times; it fleshes out descriptions with modern western analogies that are instructive and frequently eye-catching; the photographs are well integrated into the text. Most importantly, its stress is on *popular* religion, the world view of the Chinese people. This is a synthesis of what other works (like the *Life* reprint pamphlet) merely list and call "the faiths of China."

Teaching Suggestions:

1. Have the students become acquainted with Chinese religion by reading chapters 1, 2, 3, 4—either individually or in teams of four, reading and reporting to each other. Reinforce the reading with films or slides such as those put out at Yale by the Visual Education Service.
2. Then have all students read chapter 5 on popular religion. See if they can identify the source of the quotes on page 66.
3. Using de Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, develop an exercise with quotes for students to identify. Choose material from the discussion of Confucius (pp. 20-32), Laozi (Lao Tzu) (pp. 51-62), Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) (pp. 63-85), Buddhism (pp. 280-6, 350-60), Mencius (pp. 88-98).
4. Read about Mrs. Wang in chapter 5 and decide which tradition you would most likely call upon for problems in the following areas: illness, death, school, painting and art, anger or injury, happiness such as birth of a child or marriage.
5. Get a copy of the *Yijing* (*I Ching*) and learn how to toss coins for divination.

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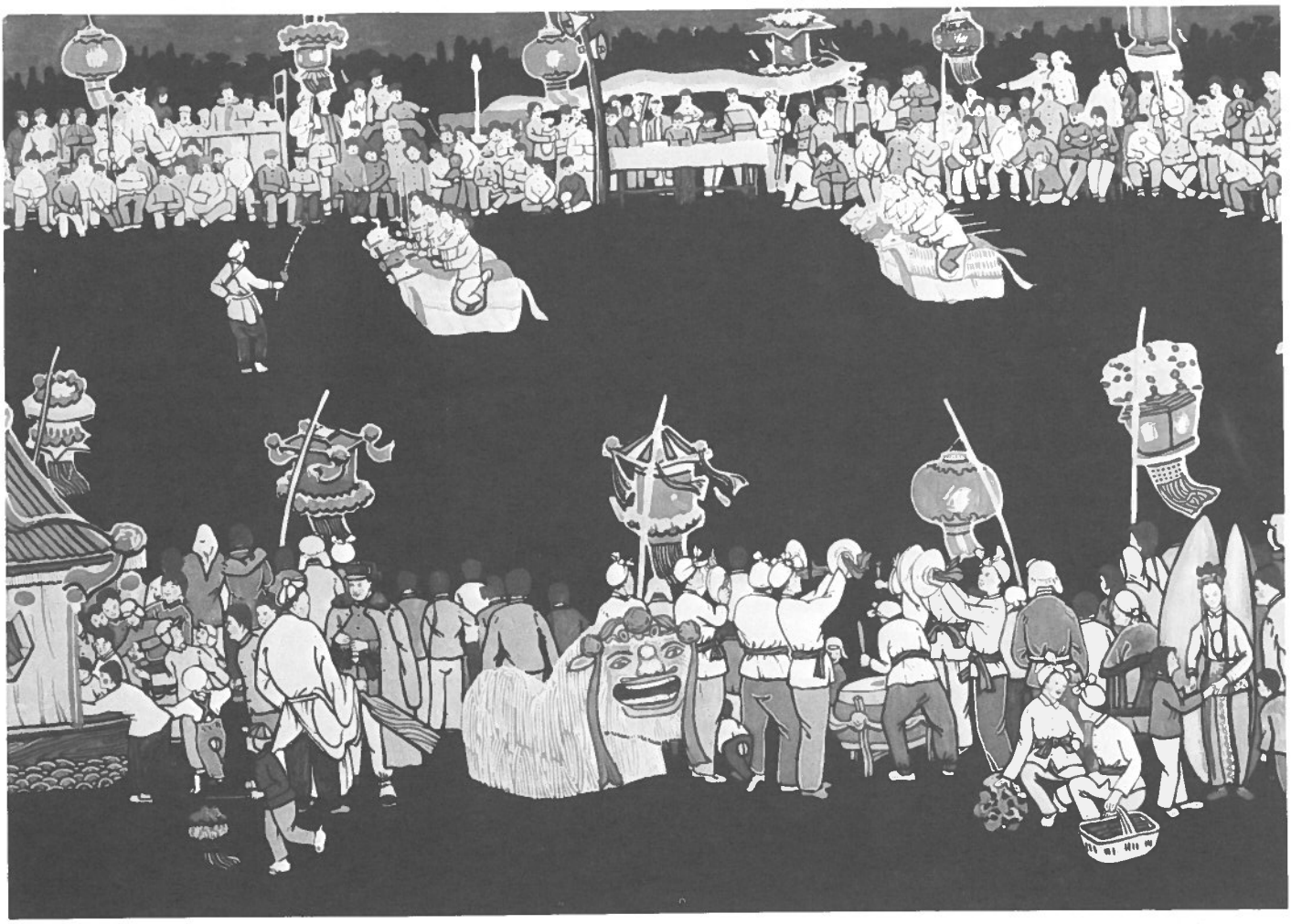
* See footnote on p.7 for a discussion of Maoism in contemporary China.



Butterfield's report reflects those limitations and frustrations.

Yet, two of the book's best chapters do reflect a balance of perspective and substance. "The Chinese Passages" provides a look at Chinese life from crib to crypt, at those human experiences that speak to some universality of human nature.

"A Pig Under the Roof—Peasants" presents a complicated picture of success and failure, progress and poverty, among China's great majority in the countryside. Butterfield tells us that he has seen only the most prosperous communes, and only on short visits; but his personal encounters are enriched by the research and overview of the Yale economist, Nicholas Lardy.

At times, Butterfield expresses surprise, even "shock" at some of his experiences and discoveries. That is surprising, given his considerable experience and training in Chinese studies. China was never the ideal some imagined or chose to believe (no more than it has been the antithesis of that); and contrary to Butterfield's implication, to acknowledge China's progress during the past thirty years is not necessarily to be a sympathizer or apologist for what has either not been accomplished or has gone wrong.

As it has sometimes been fashionable to find what is "right" about China, perhaps it is becoming fashionable to again discover what is "wrong" with China. One lesson of history is that neither extreme provides the basis for a realistic understanding of China or of Sino-American relations. If this is the first book you read (or recommend to students) about China, it should not be the only one. But for the informed reader, it is a valuable contribution, perhaps even a necessary counterweight to the romanticized views of China we have often received in recent years. It presents another side of the story, another part of the reality that helps illuminate the whole—that always elusive and often perplexing picture of China that we have no choice but to continually try to get and keep in focus.

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The Roof Tile of Tempyō
Yasushi Inoue, translated with an introduction by James T. Araki
Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1981, xvii + 140 pp., paper, $9.50.

This short novel by one of contemporary Japan's most popular writers transports the reader into the eighth century, when Japanese Buddhist monks braved hostile oceans, recalcitrant Chinese authorities, and the seemingly malignant workings of fate to bring religious texts and proper monastic discipline from China to their homeland. Four such student-monks are the objects of Inoue's focus. Two of them devote a decade of their lives to the task of bringing the famed Chinese sage, Ganjin, to Japan to teach the correct methods of ordination; others, like Gōgyō, labor selflessly, almost obsessively, to copy sacred texts for the benefit of their countrymen. In telling the story of four who struggle to bring some order to the haphazard importation of Buddhism, Inoue is painting a compassionate portrait of human life in one of the pivotal periods of Japanese cultural history.

Art credit: Cao Xiantang, *Festival at Qing River Village*, China; from the exhibition *Naive Works of Art from Xian, People's Republic of China*, A. M. Adler Fine Arts, New York

In his narrative Inoue consciously avoids the standard techniques of the historical novelist—there is little adventure in his story line (though the arduous voyage is described in vivid detail), limited verbal interaction among his characters, and scarcely any psychological probing. But Inoue's selectivity as an artist and his obvious admiration both for the monks who endure hardship and for those who are broken by it create a novel that, if not engrossing, is at least gently rewarding and affecting. We rejoice when, after two abortive attempts to cross the seas, Ganjin finally sets foot on Japanese soil. And we agonize over Gōgyō's desperate and ultimately futile efforts to transport to Japan the printed words that have all but literally been copied out with his own life's blood. If Inoue does not allow us to come close enough to know these monks intimately (as perhaps no lay person could), he does enable us to respect their unwavering devotion.

The uninitiated reader will not find this novel all smooth sailing. A wealth of Chinese and Japanese personal and place names, meanderings all over the continent (a simple map like those in the Japanese editions would have helped enormously), and a lovingly precise concern for the names of sutras and religious objects could drive away readers of lesser dedication than that of the monks in the story. The translator's fine introduction, however, provides appropriate cautions to the reader, and those who can navigate through the maze of names and endure occasional lulls will find the experience rewarding. There is little overt explication of Buddhist doctrine in the book; it could hardly serve as an introductory guidebook to the religion. Rather, the Buddhism is inherent in the very lives of the priests who exemplify devotion, endurance, and occasional resignation. Through them the Western reader can get a sense of the varied ways in which the tangled web of Buddhist teachings finds its embodiment in the lives of individual believers.

James T. Araki, Professor of Japanese at the University of Hawaii, deserves praise for the impressive skill with which he has translated an inordinately dense, difficult text. His English prose is always engaging, smooth, and faithful to the original.

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Change in the Muslim World

Philip H. Stoddard, David C. Cuthell, and Margaret W. Sullivan, eds.

Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1981, xv, 187 pp., Glossary, Selected Bibliography, Index.

It is a much-ignored truism that the "Muslim world" is diverse and divided, both in its religious lives and in the complex of political activities, policies, and decisions we call "modernization" or "development." Controversy now rages among scholars, politicians, and others as to what is shared, if anything, by the nation-states inhabited by people who call themselves Muslims. Studies of Islam-as-religion tend to emphasize the doctrinal, or at least textual, unity of Muslims everywhere; while analyses of specific societies try to demonstrate that very little is held in common among them. *Change and the Muslim World*, a collection of papers presented at a 1980 conference in Washington, embraces the diversity of Muslims, but it also asserts Islamic Unity, without demonstrating it. Unity is explicit in the introductory essay (by Philip Stoddard) and the epilogue (by Willem Bijlefeld); but the essays in between present multi-faceted, often contradictory approaches taken by Muslims to the problems of the modern world, especially those posed by the influence of Euro-American political, economic, and cultural power.*

The individual papers vary widely in scope, from John Waterbury's clear and informative summary of the role of Islam in modern Egypt to Elizabeth Fernea's curiously theoretical analysis of quotations from Qadhafi's Green Books on the Muslim (Libyan) family. The nineteen authors obviously have different expectations regarding their readers' backgrounds. Some assume specialized knowledge (e.g., on Malaysia, Sudan, Sub-Saharan Africa), while others write for the non-specialist (e.g., on Egypt, Bangladesh, Turkey). It is impressive and useful that seven of the papers were presented by Muslim scholars writing about their own countries.

The subject matter, too, shows little consistency, though education and family life appear in many of the essays. Grouped under "Modernization and Tradition," we find a study of Pakistan's government, a detailed analysis of Iran's "cultural revolution," a polemical essay on women and the family in the Sudan, and four others. The other sections contain similar variations. Virtually all of the papers have at least some mention of Iran and the Islamic Revolution, concluding without exception that no such cataclysm will take place elsewhere. In general, all of the papers discuss the relationship between Islam as a religious or ideological system and Muslims who must make that system function in the world. A wide variety of perspectives, both religious and political, is represented, and the contributors reach no consensus on solutions to the dilemmas Muslims face.

In his epilogue, Willem Bijlefeld returns to the notion that Islam *does* unify the wildly diverse peoples and nations described in the book. He writes of "the unity of Islam . . . anchored in a Muslim awareness of the sufficiency of God." But however sensitive or even-handed his perceptions, he nonetheless claims something that has not been demonstrated in the fourteen studies that precede him. The reader may well conclude that even religious unity is anachronistic among today's Muslims, however strong it may have been in the past. *Change and the Muslim World* will be very useful to a sophisticated reader wishing to discover the wide range of perceptions and solutions in modern Muslim states, but it must be read carefully in light of its unresolved issues. Editors of future volumes might attempt somewhat greater thematic unity among contributors so that comparative study of Muslim societies may be undertaken without extensive outside reading.

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*There are papers on Iran, Egypt, Pakistan, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Sudan, Libya, China, the USSR, India, Saudi Arabia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Turkey, and Indonesia.